

LONGING IN THE PAST, BELONGING IN THE FUTURE:

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC FICTION

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BACKGROUND

Through this paper, we aim to present an experimental and arts-based approach to analyzing and understanding memories and themes of nostalgia, belongingness, and longing in the present day. We wrote an autoethnographic fiction¹ to explore questions such as: what is it like to long and belong, what is it like to long for a future that is embedded in the past, what is it like to futurize/co-futurize memories?

As immigrants to Toronto, coming from nations that were once colonized, and still remain in the peripheries of colonization, we ponder about our bodies occupying the third space that we are living in, the feelings of nostalgia and belonging in our fiction. We write about our belongingness to our roots and the trajectories of our beings and think what

¹ A. Bochner, C. Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2016); C. Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography (Edition 13)* (AltaMira Press, 2004).

decolonizing the concept of memories might evoke. We draw from Erin Manning's² idea of moving towards a body-becoming to propose a collaborative autoethnographic fiction writing that implicates our memories and bodies with our surroundings and other bodies, human, beyond human, and material, as instruments of research. We hope that writing a fiction in conversation with one another and in synchronicity of each other's experiences will allow us to deconstruct and problematize our understanding of memories, the frictions between avant-garde and nostalgia, and interspersing the collaging practice will allow us to build our stories and explore belongingness and nostalgia, longing for something indefinite and unwanted memories.

Memories are understood here as complex images that allow us to reflect upon both the past and a desired future. We suggest that this desire for a future that is different from the past is manifested as longing about something – a person, love, spirituality, or a decolonial future. We both write about “involuntary autobiographical memories”³ that came to mind at some point in our lives without any preceding attempt of remembering them and use those memories to create memories of a future that is different from our past. When conceiving this project, we realized that these memories come to us spontaneously and signal towards a knowing that is yet to come, towards a bodily knowing, not just knowledge in the sense of the mind.

Through this reality-based fiction, we attempt to put forward an understanding of memories as events in the making, not something that has already happened and ended in the past. Thus, memories become articulations in motion, both articulated by the mind and the body, waiting to be made tangible by words, images, narratives, or by feelings of grief, trauma, happiness, nostalgia, and longing (when they are made tangible by the body). We write our memories as thoughts waiting to be actualized.

This disorganized, ruminative narrative is an attempt to represent the spontaneity and incipience of memories. Incipience can be defined as something that is yet to be, so for our paper, we write about memories of the future as memories not yet or memories yet to belong—incipient memories. Our stories are situated in the space between reality and fiction, past and an imagined future. The overwhelming absurdities of a desire that manifests itself in the form of a longing for a decolonial future irrupts into the narrative continually.

So, what to make of this trip through random memories? Are they just a series of memories and experiences pushing to be articulated by our minds and bodies brought about by a song that floats through our consciousness? How do these memories serve the purpose of articulating other memories that are yet to be articulated as memories, of experiences that do not exist yet? How does writing our way through these random memories build its way into connective bridges between nostalgia of the past and the longing for a future that does not emerge from the same past that we are nostalgic about? Can writing about these memories reduce the gaps between one another, between past, present, and a future yet to come, a future that might not come, between what was then and what comes next, between self and world? Can this form of ruminative, disorganized writing allow us to simultaneously exist in the past, present and future?

² E. Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012).

³ A.S. Rasmussen, D. Berntsen, “The Possible Functions of Involuntary Autobiographical Memories,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 23 (2009), p. 1137.

We chose the autoethnographic form of self-introspection to think of ways by which we can understand how our bodies physically interact with memories, time and space, and the ways in which we exist in our present inclusive of the past and the future. We chose this form to let our bodies tell their stories of desires, grief, trauma through the memories that they are interacting with. We do not have answers to all the questions we have posed and we do not wish to answer the questions in full with this singular piece of disorganized writing. We simply want to raise further questions about the rigidity and linearity of our conceptions of memories, of remembering and of longing, and we wish to futurize these conceptions in order to imagine ourselves in (im)possible futures, with different pasts altogether. We chose not to give detailed backgrounds about our stories as we want the readers and audience to make their meanings and connections with the underlying narratives and themes in the text. We want our bodies, their experiences, and connections with one another to communicate with the bodies of the readers.

Processually, we decided to create this piece by taking our understanding of self as relational to one another and to our past. The visuals of letters of the past or scarves from back home along with the lyrical imagery of memories as fluttering, felt thoughts allow us to weave our stories in relation to one another and our bodies, both being connected by the experience of living in the peripheries of colonization. We wrote parts with our real memories individually and came together to write the fictional parts, such that our realities and relationalities were co-authored in a co-autoethnographic form.

NARRATIVE I

I remember watching the snowfall from my balcony. It was December, the kind of days when the wind cuts like knives and breathing feels like it is ten times harder than usual. Every winter in Toronto feels like it's my first time experiencing it. I could never get used to the biting harsh winter here in the northwest. I looked at my fluffy indoor shoes and all I could think about was the warm sands and scorching weather of my tropical home (a thousand miles from here). We have always talked about what it would be like if we visited each other's hometown. You often talked about the colours of Ahmedabad. I could picture it as shades of turquoise, fuchsia and olive green—a stark contrast from the whiteness of the snowfall. I live vicariously through your stories. From your stories, I think about you. I think about how we have come from different places and spaces, yet somehow have found each other in the same place. I think about how you share music from home and how I could imagine myself being in your hometown. I am reminded of the time when you let me listen to your favourite song, “Titliyan yaadon ki udti jaaye, rangon mein mujhse kuch kehti jaaye...”

When I first heard the song, it reminded me of being free, of floating, of fluidity. I think about how your stories and sounds of home transcend and permeate through me. I tried to figure out what the song was telling me. What does it mean for memories to reside within us? “Titliyan yaadon ki udti jaaye...”

I ponder about memories that fully ebb and flow within me. Then, I ponder about longing... longing for something vague and indefinite. I ponder about my own physical and mental displacement in another country that I do not call home. I ponder about belonging and getting frustrated because I am not sure if I could ever belong. I ponder about home, about Toronto and about how different it would be if I wouldn't have moved across oceans. I ponder about my own skin and how I have grown to embrace it even after years of not accepting it since I got so used to being told “You're so dark-skinned for a Filipinx!” I ponder

about how despite everything that confuses and irates me, there is you that I find refuge in. There is you that reminds me of safety. Ever since I met you, you taught me how to be, how to be with myself, my memories, my nostalgia, my desires. There is you that reminds me of memories of hope, light, and the future. Most importantly, there is you who taught me how to listen, to listen to the world that binds and contradicts, to listen to the sounds of the everyday that reminds me that memories are very much alive within me.

I continue to marvel at the forming icicles in my balcony roof, and I am taken to moments from my past. Do you believe in belonging in moments? I will try my best to explain but I experienced it so many times, over and over again. It goes all the way back since I was 11 years old.

I grew up in this place called ‘Golden City’ in Cavite, Philippines. Golden City is a subdivision with row houses so close to one another you could hear laughter and conversations between the walls of the tiny houses. My friends and I would usually play outside around 4 p.m. We will play karpintero, tumbang preso and maiba-taya. Anong nilaro mo nung bata ka pa? What were the games you played when you were young? Saturday afternoons often looked like this: my friends and I would usually meet outside my house. Someone would suggest what games that we would play and all of us would scurry to find the instruments to play or make the game. One time we decided to make a kite. We all sourced out for bamboo strings and plastics around the corner of the street. We also improvised rubber strings to glue everything together. I remember running around, my eardrums ringing from too much giggling and sitting in the streets of Golden City. I remember the colours of the houses, the warm weather of Cavite, and the sound of tricycles passing by.

Ten years later, I have moved to two different countries, oceans away from the humble street of Golden City. Yet, whenever I visit that particular street where I grew up in, I would relive and experience those Saturday afternoons of my childhood. I remember meeting my childhood friend, Paolo, in the same street and I feel exactly the same 10 years ago – except that our bodies have changed so much. Paolo’s feet are now size 11 and he’s 5’11. We used to be the same height. I took a long inhale to feel the joy and thrill of those moments 10 years ago. That tug in my heart when I stood at the exact same street it’s when I knew I belonged in that moment.

“Titliyan yaadon ki uditi jaaye, rangon mein mujhse kuch kehti jaaye...” The song makes me nostalgic of the past, the innocence of childhood and the warm weather of Cavite. I sway and hum in reverie. I close my eyes and move through the room. I follow where my body takes me. There’s something about dancing with your eyes closed. I feel invincible. I feel that I could face anything, be anything...

I almost tripped over a pile of letters that I left on the floor. I was cleaning my room and found a box of memorabilia that I brought from home. The box contained letters from my friends during my birthdays, friendship-versary, happy moments, farewell party... I forgot that I took them all the way here. I am a very sentimental person, I keep everything safe just so that I could relive those moments over and over again. I caressed and smelled every letter... I wonder if any of my friends remember the words that they wrote on the card?

I looked at the card and just saw empty words and promises. I am suddenly reminded of the words that I get bombarded with every day. I am reminded of the headlines that say “Lawmakers Vote to Shut Down Philippines’ Largest TV Network” or “In a Manila Slum, Coronavirus Lockdown hits hard”... it can go on and on. I am reminded of words that continue to appease my countrymen just so that the people in power continue to take control. I am reminded of the empty words and lip service of the Philippine government even before

the pandemic started. I am reminded of how until this very day, many Filipinx are held hostage under a hostile and misogynistic leadership. Many people said that his leadership has nullified all the progress in the past. Yet, one has to ask: has there been even any progress at all? Has there been any progress even after 300 years of colonisation by the Spaniards we continue to be manipulated by our own unscrupulous government? Has there been any progress when poverty continues to plug the slums of Manila? Has there been any progress when many Filipinx continue to pursue going abroad just so that they could achieve a comfortable living wage? Has there been any progress when my fellow countrymen continue to glorify whiteness than our naturally dark-skin tone? I feel defeated and overwhelmed thinking about this. I feel helpless because I am a thousand miles away from home, yet I carry these stories and questions within me every day. There is no escape in this reality that we are living in. I am afraid of how long it will take to undo the trauma.

“Titliyan yaadon ki udti jaaye, rangon mein mujhse kuch kehti jaaye...” I am reminded of memories that I want to forget, memories that I wish never existed.

These moments, in-betweenness, the unquantifiable within. I find it hard to articulate them. Words don't come easily to me. But I've always felt them. We have not really had any conversation about belonging in moments, but you always talk about dwelling in, attuning to your interiority, emotions, and senses.

It usually seizes you in an immaterial way. You said. What did you mean by that? I have a lot of questions. I wish you were beside me right now.

I remember us dancing in the woods. I remember the feeling of liberation, feeling like structures do not exist, that I am free to move and be with the world. As we let our bodies collide, I remember you teaching me to break through it all. You taught me how to listen to the learnings that arise when one attunes and responds to their interiority. Maybe this is the way out of my frustration and anger. Maybe this is the way to process the stories that linger in my memory. I remembered you when doing a dance exercise last year. We were given the theme of innocence. I listened, moved, and ebbed through the rhythm as my mind and body wandered through the memories of Golden City once again. This time, I revisited the moment in a different space, yet I was able to reconnect myself to the sounds and colours of the street. I traced the concrete and touched the walls of the tiny row houses as I implicated my body in the exercise. Remember when we danced together for the very first time? It was a cathartic moment for me. The vacillating, momentary motions, emotions – you told me that it's within my body. Maybe that was within me when I visited Golden City. Maybe I was carrying those moments, emotions, feelings when I was reliving that moment of my childhood. Does belonging in the moment then mean belonging in your body?

All I can say is, there is a longing within me of the past, of the memories of the time that has passed. Sometimes, I wonder if I could become the past?

As I dance to your body's presence, your presence, I still have a lot of questions, but you are now beside me.

NARRATIVE 2

I am afraid you might find me in a complicated dance. In a rumination that is as disorganized as my thoughts are. I am afraid you might find me overwhelmed on a moonlit night on a sultry Saturday in December. Not the humid kind, but sultry in the sense of provoking something, making something sensible. It is also a silent night. So silent that I can hear the

clock strike 2:30 a.m. I am awake by habit. Out of habit too, I go about thinking, listening to my body experience the silent moonlit night. I look out of the French windows in my new apartment and my eyes settle on a bare tree – it's leafless branches covered in snow. I am drawn to this tree. I know not why and I know not how. I just know that I am drawn to the bare tree that I can see from my apartment window. I decided to walk to the tree and be in its presence. I touch it's coarse bark, cold trunk, and the flimsy leafless branches, hugging it tightly. And as I am in the company of the tree, I realize that I have longed for this night, this moonlit, silent night in particular for a very long time. This is the kind of night that brings about answers, realizations, recognitions, and questions, even. This is the kind of night where things fall into place. We say, "sukoon mehsoos hota hai" in Hindi. This is the kind of night when one feels at peace, feels the sukoon. This is the kind of night that seems to resolve and break through. I think it breaks through the ordinary flow of everyday life. It disrupts, yet it brings peace. And even though this is the kind of night I was longing for, I cannot quite grasp it. The darkness, the sensuality, the quietude, and the bare tree pull me towards something... a different kind of longing, I think. The darkness, the sensuality, the quietude, and the bare tree pull me towards something... that bursts into my consciousness and grips my awareness. I am fully engulfed by this something, something unknown, yet I cannot grasp it.

I took a photo of the night, of the bare leafless tree, to remember what I felt in those moments and what I was about to feel in the moments that followed, as I walked back to my apartment. The night, on this sultry Saturday, signals to me as if it wants me to know something.

I am now back at my apartment. It is 3 a.m., the night much the same, moonlit, quiet, and dark. Except now, the sound of the kettle and my reflective thoughts about what I long for when my longing for a night like this one is over irrupt the quiet.

As I go about thinking—listening to my body experience the silent moonlit night, the tree, and its texture that is now within me—I am reminded of one of my favourite songs. "Titliyan yaadon ki udti jaaye, rangon mein mujhse kuch kehti jaaye," slips into my consciousness. The song that I have mentioned to you, the song you remember, the one that you mention too.

This is a song that inspires, grounds, and resounds me. I have listened to and lived with this song for 11 years now. I have grown with the song, and sometimes beyond it, but I always find myself coming back to it. As I feel the song and make meaning of the song again, "Titliyan yaadon ki udti jaaye," the memories flutter around like butterflies... I ask myself what memories are about to come to me or if I am going to delve into the memories of the song itself. Memories that have pushed me to listen to the song, both happy and agonizing, memories of my body moving in happiness and agony, memories that reside in my body... all of it! And in that moment, as the thought finishes, my life runs to me, experiences, grievances, regrets, happy moments of the last 24 years run through me as I move to Faisal Kapadia's deep, calming voice. Memories of what might be, the future that is shaped from a past and a present that are a fantasy, not the past and the present that constitute the realities of my everyday life, run through me. The presence of the bare tree within me, somehow drawing my attention to the idea of futurization of memories. I pause the beautiful, reflective voice of Faisal Kapadia. I pause to think and understand what my brain and my body are pointing to. Can one have memories of the future? Are they telling me to conceive memories of a future that may exist? How will I know what that will look like? How can I conceive something that hasn't come yet, that hasn't happened yet, something that is still unknown and can never be known in its futuristic sense? Something that is unknowable.

As I go about thinking – listening to my body experience this powerful emergence of thoughts about the future, the memories of a future that is yet to come, the silent moonlit night, the tree and its texture that is now within me – I am reminded of one of my favourite songs. “Titliyan yaadon ki udti jaaye, rangon mein mujhse kuch kehti jaaye,” slips into my consciousness. The song that I have mentioned to you, the song you remember, the one that you mention too.

This is a song that inspires, grounds, and resounds me. I have listened to and lived with this song for 11 years now. I have grown with the song, and sometimes beyond it, but I always find myself coming back to it. And in that moment, I am left with a longing for something familiar, something tangible, something other than Faisal Kapadia’s voice. I pull out my mother’s dupatta from a pile of “things from back home.” The dupatta still smells like her, even though she hasn’t worn it in 6 years. It feels like her and I can see her twirling in the beautiful pastel green scarf pulled around her. I smell it, feel it, and wrap it around my neck. A lot of people have told me that I look like her. I run to the mirror to look for her beauty, her wisdom, her sense of care. I want to look like her. You see, I want to look familiar. I want to look like her. Thinking about all the times that she was just at a “ma come here” distance, I long for her presence. Somehow through her, I long for your presence.

I remember the time I first met you. I saw you and looked at the beauty in your eyes, the shine of your hair, the pain, the conflict, the unending longing for something. I looked at all of it in one glance. And, I was drawn to you, or maybe it was the longing for something within you that I was drawn to. Seeing you for the first time a few years ago erupted memories within me. Memories that keep me up, memories that are actually not mine, memories that I have only made through the lived experiences of my ancestors and my parents. Memories that I wish did not exist. I am reminded of my grief, of my pain, of my trauma. I am reminded once again what it feels when your gut wrenches upon thinking a thought. How goosebumps arise, how affects within us happen, but we don’t realize and recognize them, affects that shape and un-shape us. I am reminded of the time when I moved to Toronto, when English was going to become the language I spoke every day. The time that I realized that I have a good grasp of the English language because my nation was once colonized and till date suffers from the ongoing effects of colonization. You made me think and feel all of this without even saying a “hello.” Remembering you remind me of all my grief, my trauma, pain, is making me move, both outside, that you can see, and inside, that you cannot, that you will never see. I remember how my heart pounded in that moment, how I felt unbearably sad because of the tension that resides in my body. The tension of being a colonized body, a body that never was really colonized, but was born from a colonized womb. A body that will always remember the way the womb opened my heart to my mother, father and through their experiences and stories to the lives of the millions of Indians and Pakistanis that were also colonized. You remind me of the tension of being colonized and not at the same time. What do I do with this grief? Do I just remain happy with the fact that I was born long after the British left? Or do I recall the constantly residual idea that my body could have been more useful like that of my grandfather and grandmother if I was born with them?

I chose instead to focus on and admire your beauty, your body that seems so calm, free from these tensions. I long—in the moment, for your body. I came to say “hello” to you. I find your chipper voice and happy tone very eerie. Sometimes, you come to me as a violent memory. This moonlit Saturday night was one of those times. Your memory and the memories in me you brought back were violent, were causing turmoil, were making me weep and move ferociously, but yet there was a sense of euphoria. I think the euphoria is that of being

able to meet you, to love you, to be loved by you, and to never be abandoned. The euphoria is that of longing for something through you. The euphoria cuts the violent presence of our first meeting. I pause, I let the euphoria lurk around. I move in euphoria, my body sways, my lips smirk. I feel your body near mine, I feel your touch, your breath, the heat of it, I feel the softness of your lips and the coarseness of your hands, I feel the sound of your heart beating, your desire to protect me, your desire to learn from me and your desire to give me something. I feel, once again, the connection we share, and the connection we so immediately created after once sharing what movement and memories meant to us. When we became each other. You spoke my language, not the English language, but the language of my heart, of my soul. Tumne meri zaban boli, angrezi nahin, mere dil aur junoon ki zaban. I remember that day because we spoke each other's language, until we didn't have to speak anymore. I felt like I had transcended my colonial body, and that is when I started longing. Longing for a future that would never exist with our past, my past.

I remember that day, it was 2019, it was December 26th. It was 2 p.m., we were in a cafe, drinking coffee, sharing a butter croissant with some pistachio toppings. I remember the gloom of December in 2019, but that gloom was so much better than the gloom that surrounds us now. Where I can't sit with you, where I can't move with you, where I can't feel your laughter and your touch. I feel alone today. Alone in my mind, in my memories, and in my colonization. I do not want to be together in colonization, but yet I am with so many others who are colonized or whose mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers were once colonized. This loneliness in togetherness is scathing. The togetherness is scathing, because all it means is that millions of lives have been brutalized by the hunger of power and the ideation to conquer. I sway in desperation, in anguish. I sway in sadness to "Titliyaan yaadon ki..." to the song that grounds me. I sway in love. In the love that I have for you, that you have for me. I sway in desperation as I ask, akhir is dard ki dawa kya hai? What is the remedy to this pain? And as I get eaten in the pain, in the anguish in the terror and the trauma of the Partition of 1947, the memories of a future emerging from a colonization-less, partitionless past exist as a desire in my body.

It is now almost 4 a.m. and Faisal Kapadia's calming voice is still around. A different song is playing. I am now tired and decided to sit. Still thinking, feeling, forming incipient desires of a future that remedies the pains of our past. I am reminded of February 28, 2020. When we sat together in our tiny office space, and I asked you: what is it that you long for? You said unconditional love, belonging, and the desire to become with something. Then you said: ikaw ba? I could not muster up an answer, but I said: I long for a future of love, acceptance, blessings and solidarity. Then, I said, what I really long for... A future where India and Pakistan are not at a propagandist war. A future where my body does not know the grief and the trauma of the Partition of 1947. And then, as you looked at me with patience and empathy, I felt my body travel from immediacy to reflection.

I realize that colonization is painful. But my realization of colonization happens through the Partition of India and Pakistan, the separation, the violence, the rape, the deaths, the destruction, and most importantly the uprooting. And that is exhausting. I have never been to Pakistan but I listen to Pakistani music, I eat Pakistani food, I wear Pakistani clothing, I speak, understand, and write their language. Sometimes I am more connected with Urdu than I am to Hindi. I feel that part of me has been uprooted from belonging to Pakistan, from calling it my own nation. I have an ambiguous relationship with this void of not belonging, this wanting to belong, and the uncertainty that follows the longing to belong. It is a twitch in the gut that stays with me, always. When I moved to Toronto in 2014 and started speaking

English every day, I thought I would belong here. 6 years have passed, I still speak English every day, but now, I also speak Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, and Marwadi every day. I don't want to belong here. I feel like belonging here means to accept my colonization, and not resent it. Belonging here would be not respecting the womb that birthed me. That bravely resented and fought colonization to birth me in a free India. The partition, the memories of it that I have heard, seen, imbibed are very familiar, known and unknown at the same time.

Desires of a better past, grasp me, my thoughts, my soul. Talking to you about them makes me want to crumble into something else than myself. It makes me want to exist differently. Working through my desire to have a partitionless past also means working through the discomfort of knowing that such a desire leads to erasures. Erasures of histories, other desires that are not the same as mine. How do I desire undesiring such desires then? How do I come together with the tension that stems from wanting to belong and wanting to be born out of a womb that will never be colonized? Not in a temporal sense of history, but in a way that being born from the womb of a woman of colour that never had to worry about power, privilege, and colonization? My remembrance of you as the sun sets and creates a crimson across the sky brings me to an intimate knowing of unknowing. That experience, traumas no matter how big or small, once known can never be unknown. How do we desire unknownness without erasing someone else's past? What would it mean to be in a future that does not know partition? A future that has no memories of the past? I tried for hours to conceive one. I could not. That's why I still long for it and I long for you, as I continue to sway to Faisal Kapadia's emphatic, powerful, and deep voice.

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SUMMARY

In this autoethnographic writing, we explore the concepts of longing and belonging through a collaborative writing process that is fictional at times and autoethnographic at times. We present an experimental and arts-based approach to analyzing and understanding memories, and themes of nostalgia, belongingness, and longing in the present day. Through our autoethnographic fiction (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Ellis 2004) we explore questions such as: what is it like to long and belong, what is it like to long for a future that is embedded in the past, what is it like to futurize/co-futurize memories, and what if the past is the pre-present? As immigrants to Toronto, coming from nations that were once colonized, and still remain in the peripheries of colonization, we ponder about our bodies occupying the third space that we are living in, the feelings of nostalgia and belonging in our fiction. We write about our belongingness to our roots and the trajectories of our beings and think what decolonizing the the concept of memories might evoke. Methodologically, we draw from Erin Manning's (2016) idea of going against method to propose a collaborative autoethnographic fiction writing and collaging practice that implicates our memories and bodies with our surroundings and other bodies, human, beyond human, and material, as instruments of research. We suggest that the decolonization and dehistoricization of memories and our conceptions of longing, belonging, and creating futures embedded in the past can happen by futurizing our notions of memories. We hope that writing a fiction in conversation with one another and in synchronicity of each other's experiences will allow us to deconstruct and problematize our understanding of memories, the frictions between avant-garde and nostalgia and interspersing the collaging practice will allow us to build our stories and explore belongingness and nostalgia, longing for something indefinite and unwanted memories.

KEYWORDS

longing, belonging, colonization, partition, autoethnography